

Trading Lobster Tales with Billy Bennet

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

Billy Bennett was born to be a lobsterman. As a young boy growing up on Saquish, he developed a precocious appreciation for Duxbury Bay and its resources. When he was "knee high to a grasshopper," Bennett spent countless mornings pulling up traps with his cousin and uncles, all professional lobstermen.

Today, Bennett's 15-year old grandson visits each August to learn the trade and help his grandfather haul in the day's catch.

For 25 years, Bennett worked in the family's local business, Bennett Tire but still kept a hand in fishing whether it was digging clams or catching tuna fish. Then in 1982, Bennett traded in the tires for lobster traps, retired from the family business, and pursued his second love (his wife Nancy being the first.) He never regretted the decision. "I finally



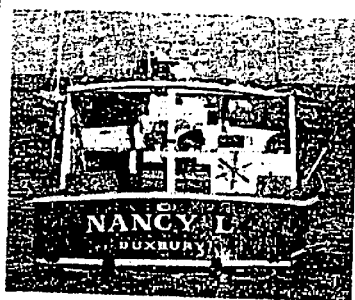
At dawn Billy Bennett heads out to his lobster boat, the "Nancy L," to begin another 12-hour day. His rowboat is loaded with bait for his lobster traps.

Photo by David Grossman

boats because of its size—small enough for one person to handle, but large enough to take anywhere. Wooden lobster boats have a shorter life span, he said, and require more maintenance.

Spring, when lobsters migrate in from the deep waters, marks the start of lobster season for Billy Bennett. His workdays begin when most Duxbury residents are sleeping. By summer, he will start his 12-hour day at three in the morning. It begins with the bait man at Brant Rock, then, off to the "Nancy L" moored in the harbor near the town pier where he will load up and head out as dawn breaks.

The biggest job, said Bennett, is hauling the traps up over the boat when you're moving 300 traps on a good day. This is half of his total traps. (State and federal laws currently limit commercial lobstermen who are fishing within 25 miles from shore to a total of 800 traps.) Today's hydraulic machinery on lobster



Bennett's lobster boat, the "Nancy L" is named for his wife and daughter.

Photo by D. Grossman

got to do what I always wanted to do," he said.

He already owned a JC Lobster boat, a 32-foot long, 12-foot wide fiberglass traditional lobster boat with forward cabin. "It's like my right arm," he says of his boat, "The Nancy L," named after his wife and daughter. He prefers it to other

boats allows fisherman to haul in many more traps a day than they could years ago.

Bennett usually does his lobster fishing alone. It's solitary work—a sort of old man and the sea existence—compared with other careers, and as Bennett admits, it can be lonely. But he wouldn't trade it for any other work. "Where do I begin," he said on why he loves lobster fishing. "It's the independence and being with nature. I'm not a really religious man, but being out there is like being in church all the time."

When Bennett worked in the family tire business, he was responsible for eight to 10 people, and there would be problems with staff, he said. Lobster fishing, though "not as good financially," doesn't have those issues. Bennett wouldn't trade daybreak on the bay or the sound of the "wind whistling out there" for a lucrative office job.

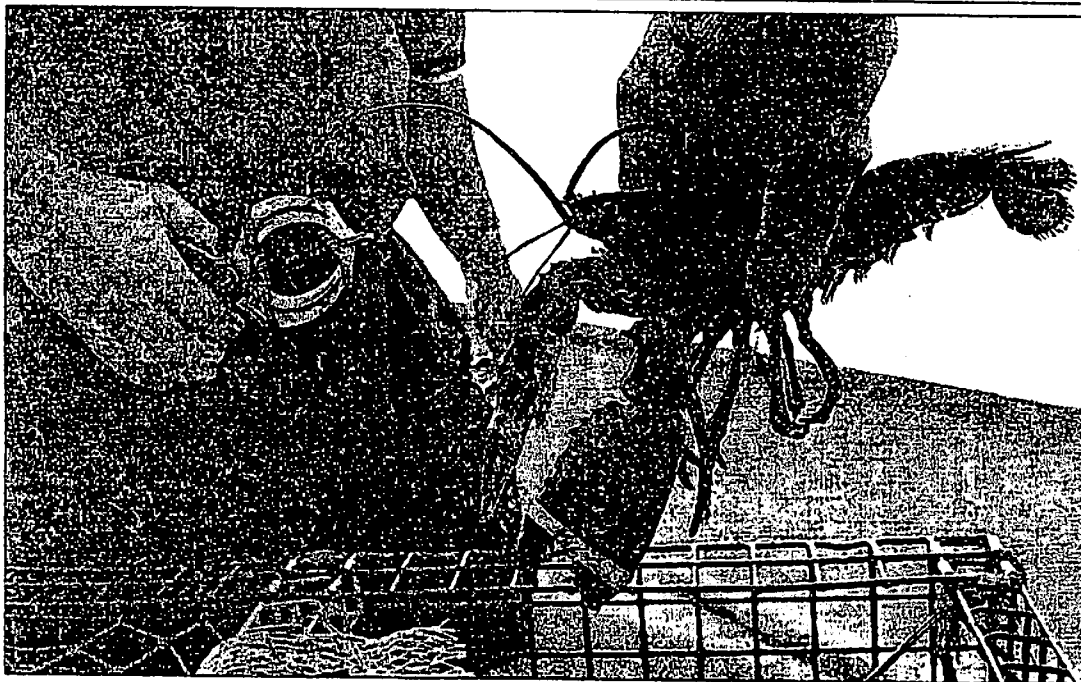
"I did this by choice, lots do it by necessity," explained Bennett about his decision. He finds that with any type of fishing career, "if you don't love it,

A Look at Duxbury's Commercial Lobster Industry

	2000	1995	1990	1985	1980
Fishermen	18	10	5	n/a	n/a
Total Pounds	58,285	86,814	44,257	43,261	25,701
Price per lb.	3.65	3.20	2.46	2.47	2.14
Catch Value	\$212,740	\$277,905	\$108,872	\$106,855	\$55,000

Note: Source of information is Mass. Division of Marine Fisheries Catch Reports. Lobstermen are required to file a catch report annually; and total pounds may be undervalued for this reason.

Y - Wholesale price



With care, thick rubber bands are applied to keep a lobster's claws in check.

Photo by David Grossman

you have a real problem" because it's so time consuming. "And, you would be miserable under the adverse conditions," for which there are many in this business, such as the six to eight foot waves, a residual from a tropical storm, that Bennett battled recently as he hauled up the traps. There's also the breaking of ice to get your boat out of the harbor, and then worrying if you will be able to get back in with your catch. "It's not for everyone, and I see a lot come and go."

The pleasures far out weigh the adversities for this lobsterman. "Every day on the bay is different, the sky is different, and I never get tired of seeing dawn." He describes the tranquility of daybreak when

the shorebirds are "just waking up," and there are no people, except a few fishermen and sometimes a rower or two. "It's the best time of day on the bay; it's too beautiful for words."

How many lobsters he will find in a trap will depend on the season, weather, and the lobster's shedding process. Temperatures impact the harvest of lobsters, which prefer gradual changes. A season of sudden change and drops in temperature will mean a bad year for the lobsterman. A fisherman must always adjust his fishing areas depending on season and the lobsters' shedding process. A string of eight lobster pots may bring only one or three lobsters per catch during off-season while the fall could bear 25 to 30 lobsters. "If you looked at it as an average in Duxbury, you trap about a half a lobster per pot year round," said Bennett.

The amount of catch is also related to the lobster's growth stage. Lobsters grow by shedding their shells. Bennett and his brethren call them "jelly rolls." At this stage, the lobster is vulnerable to the stripe bass and codfish until its new shell hardens, which takes three weeks to a month. During the shedding process, lobsters gravitate toward rocky areas to protect themselves. Once their shells harden, they move into open waters and go on feeding binges to fill their new body. This means bigger catches for lobstermen. "Fall is always a really good time because it's after the lobsters shed their shell, and they are hungry and out feeding," said Bennett.

Today in Duxbury, there are six commercial lobstermen, including Bennett, fishing these waters. In 1999, eight Duxbury fishermen caught a total of 61,744 pounds of inshore lobster ranking them 34th in the state. Based on an average price of \$3.74 per pound, the value of their catch was \$230,922. In 1895, it took a Duxbury lobsterman a week to trap nine hundred big lobsters and for that he received six cents each.